

# A STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT OF DOWNTOWN BLACKSBURG, VIRGINIA

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## APPENDIX

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>SECTION I:COMMUNITY INPUT .....</b>	<b>3</b>
1.0 Assets and Opportunities.....	3
1.1 Downtown Assets.....	3
1.2 Downtown Opportunities .....	3
1.3 Favorite Places in Town.....	4
2.0 Challenges and Obstacles.....	5
2.1 General Downtown Problems.....	5
2.2 Downtown Obstacles .....	5
2.3 Development Process Obstacles.....	6
2.4 Parking.....	7
2.5 Vehicular Circulation .....	7
2.6 Pedestrian System .....	7
3.0 Needs and Desires .....	7
3.1 Downtown Needs.....	7
3.2 Desired Uses for Downtown .....	8
4.0 Community Leadership and University Relations.....	9
4.1 Leadership for Downtown Blacksburg.....	9
4.2 Keys to Success.....	9
4.3 University/Town Relations.....	9
4.4 University Plans.....	10
<b>Section II: Critical Issues .....</b>	<b>11</b>
1.0 Physical Plan Components .....	11
2.0 Marketing Plan Components.....	12
3.0 Responsibilities and Action.....	12

## **INTRODUCTION**

This Downtown Blacksburg Strategic Assessment Report is based on over forty community leadership interviews, several small group sessions, and two public town hall meetings conducted during the week of November 27, 2000. The interviews and meetings focused on the assets, challenges, needs, and desires for the future of Blacksburg.

Many of the points made in this report are directly from interviewees and reflect their opinions and perceptions about downtown Blacksburg. While the consultant team does not necessarily agree with every point, it is important to indicate these thoughts in this assessment to provide an accurate perspective on attitudes toward downtown. The comments have not been attributed due to the candid nature of the interviews.

The report is divided into two sections:

### ***Section I: Community Input***

Section I includes all community input and is designed as the “raw” information gathered in the interview process. In order to protect the confidentiality of individual interviewees and to better organize the information, this input was categorized in the following manner:

1. Assets and Opportunities
2. Challenges and Obstacles
3. Needs and Desires
4. Projects and Progress
5. Community Involvement and Leadership
6. University/Town Relations
7. Visions and Quotes

### ***Section II: Critical Issues***

This section interprets the information gathered in section one into several “critical path elements” that will need to be incorporated into the plan itself and the process used to create the plan. These issues are, in essence, themes that ran through the majority of our interviews and merit special attention during the master plan process.

## **SECTION I: COMMUNITY INPUT**

### **1.0 *Assets and Opportunities***

#### **1.1 Downtown Assets**

- Virginia Tech is a great asset to the downtown.
- Downtown area is the center of culture, entertainment, and employment for the region.
- The town and the university generally present aesthetically pleasing environments , especially in the spring.
- Unique stores
- Great events – Summer concerts, Steppin’ Out festival, pep rallies
- Highest volume Subway in country – shops do well downtown
- The community has done some smaller projects in the downtown that have been successful.
- Strong office market due to Virginia Tech’s needs for space.
- Collegiate Square has attracted small specialty shops, locally owned and operated.
- Church Street has a great atmosphere.
- Lyric Theater
- Kelsey House
- Variety of restaurants – many of which are locally owned
- Municipal golf course
- Old Town Hall
- Blue Ridge Outdoors
- Printers Ink is a great bookstore (located not downtown but close by.)
- Kinkos
- Post Office is still located downtown.
- Farmers’ Market
- Foot traffic from close by neighborhoods

#### **1.2 Downtown Opportunities**

- Opportunity to capitalize on the technology businesses in to the area.
- Alumni: who come to downtown to eat, party, buy souvenirs. We need to capitalize on their visits to the community.
- Visitors and tourism: 12 – 15 visitor weekends a year – football games, graduation, move-in etc.
- Students and university employees: a “captive” market for downtown businesses.

- Existing events: Steppin' Out, Farmers Market, and Summer Arts Festival are opportunities that can be expanded.
- Large scale retail moved to bypass – opportunity for specialty retail, niche markets (i.e. art galleries?)
- “We need a hook to get dorm students off campus – perhaps an ice skating rink” or other public gathering place/activity center.
- Four non-profit theatre groups in town that do not have permanent homes – opportunity to satisfy their needs.
- Talks have resumed about a friendly merger of the two Chambers of Commerce, which presents an opportunity to market the downtown through a regional group.
- Opportunity to create an “arts district” in the downtown using the Lyric combined with the plans that the University has to construct facilities.
- There is an opportunity to look at an “expanded” downtown that stretches from the Middle School to the intersection with Prices Fork Road.
- Middle School presents an opportunity for an anchor in the south end of downtown and could house a variety of potential uses:
  - Arts/crafts
  - Academic – secondary and post secondary
  - Magnet school
  - “Extended Day”/non-student uses
  - Civic/exhibition
  - Commercial – “Inn”
  - Residential – senior housing/activities
  - Municipal facilities
  - Parks & Recreation

### **1.3 Favorite Places in Town**

- Henderson lawn
- View north towards Christmas Tree
- Price's Fork Road towards Hethwood
- Mountain views/setting
- Duck pond/solitude
- Burruss Hall
- Clay Street Pasture
- Golf Course Vista
- College Avenue/Lyric

## **2.0 Challenges and Obstacles**

### **2.1 General Downtown Problems**

- Many buildings and facades are not being maintained adequately and are unattractive.
- Rodents and birds have presented problems in the downtown in the past.
- Outdoor trash collection has left stains, smells, and debris on the sidewalks.
- Rents are not stabilized downtown.
- Quality breaks down at the end of the campus toward downtown, traditionally viewed as the “back door”
- Merchants do not try to capture business – some complacency.
- Introducing too much “fake” to the downtown is a problem – must use authentic materials and not try and create an “artificial” environment.
- Unfriendly environments (dark alleys, inefficient open spaces, poor signage)
- Town is “Unfriendly towards development.”
- Pedestrian feel erodes immediately outside of the downtown area.
- Upgrade aesthetics of downtown – “Bring it up a notch.”
- Visually incoherent, needs a “sense of completeness.”
- Trees used to tie downtown together – this has eroded over time as trees have been lost.
- Many feel that the downtown has become dominated by the University.

### **2.2 Downtown Obstacles**

- Downtown suffers from a perception that it’s only a place for students to party.
- Perception that there is no reason to shop downtown.
- Downtown lacks a “retail identity” in the region.
- Downtown is geographically constrained by neighborhoods, which limits how much development can take place.
- Lack of sites for new development close to downtown diminishes the opportunities for growth.
- Easy to sell apartments which limits developers from taking risk.
- Few people understand what it takes to complete a development.
- The University has duplicated commercial activities on campus. The food courts are extraordinary – high-end restaurants selling at cost. Very difficult to get on-campus students to patronize restaurants downtown.
- Many of the properties have a positive cash flow that limits what owners are willing to do to their properties.
- Property owners that will not maintain or invest in buildings are a challenge to future success of downtown.

- Inappropriate mix of uses – too many bars. Can Town review/restrict future permits for beer/liquor licenses?
- Master plan effort is holding up progress downtown and is another way to stall the development of the downtown community.
- The tendency is to study things to death in Blacksburg.
- “This is a college town not an historical town.”
- Traditional perception of HCMF as a landlord is not positive.
- The fact that much of downtown is owned by one company limits what can happen in the downtown area.
- Blacksburg is perceived as an elite community by surrounding areas.
- Rent for University facilities is expensive for volunteer arts groups.
- It is just as easy to drive to Christiansburg for a meal than to stay in Blacksburg.
- Blacksburg has not been able to attract national retailers in downtown.
- Some businesses still close in summer months. Retailing has changed, have the local businesses adapted?

### **2.3 Development Process Obstacles**

- Business people demand closure – cannot wait on the Town to decide which direction to pursue.
- Town wants development but will not accommodate developers.
- Town Fathers must look at the business climate – lots and lots of hoops to go through.
- Businesses in Blacksburg are “regulated to death.”
- Neighborhood protectionism climate has prevailed at the expense of community businesses.
- Idealists run the town rather than business people.
- Target is always moving – zoning.
- Development is a dirty word in Blacksburg.
- Height limitations in downtown are unreasonable.
- Anti-business Town Council
- One or two people can overturn a land development decision.
- “The process beats you up.”
- Parking regulations, signage regulations are stringent.
- Historic Design Review Board is a difficult process for many
- The Community must create a balance between:
  - Residential and entertainment
  - Students and permanent residents
  - Old and new

## **2.4     Parking**

- Lack of parking downtown
- Parking as a perception only?
- Access, signage, and location of parking resources are not clear.
- Downtown has the opportunity to develop shared parking (church lots).
- Parking enforcement is a problem: students who park and go to class, employees who feed the meters all day but don't move their cars.
- Without adequate easy to find parking people will not be interested in coming downtown.
- Underground parking must be a consideration in any discussion of parking.
- Parking has to be behind buildings.
- Need a parking management strategy first then concentrate on new resources.

## **2.5     Vehicular Circulation**

- Close College Avenue (allow limited movement, service/access.)
- Consider one way or pedestrian streets such as in Charlottesville.
- Turning movements from Draper onto College and from Main onto College are hazardous.
- Arterial traffic flow is a problem through the center of town.
- Town Council lost political resolve to bring Patrick Henry Around to connect creating a by-pass for downtown.

## **2.6     Pedestrian System**

- More pedestrian crossings are needed: Main Street and elsewhere.
- Existing pedestrian crossings need improvement.
- Lighted pedestrian crosswalks downtown are an idea.
- Must channel pedestrians to particular area perhaps using special signs directing people to pedestrian areas.
- Crosswalks should be part of the sidewalk system not part of the road.
- Pedestrian system is fractured.
- Sidewalks drain toward the storefronts in some locations causing problems.

# **3.0    *Needs and Desires***

## **3.1     Downtown Needs**

- Develop a sense of "completeness" in the downtown.
- Promote a diversity of uses.
- Need a tourism piece that promotes downtown Blacksburg.
- Downtown merchants association directory.



- Events should attract families, elderly, and students together.
- Need a more pro-business climate.
- Town needs to hire street cleaners, do routine clean up downtown, and enforce littering ordinance.
- Trash cans downtown are too small to be useful.
- Birds in the trees create a mess.
- "Pedestrian Zones" or a pedestrian mall
- Need loading zones.
- Restrictions on shop signing
- Clear street signing directing motorists and pedestrians
- Alternate ways through town
- Downtown needs a "hook" to attract people.
- More public events need to take place.
- Promote alternate means of transportation.
- Need a "sound bite" that handles the complexity of downtown.
- Town must engage the "civic infrastructure" to support plans.

### **3.2 Desired Uses for Downtown**

- More galleries and specialty shops
- High end restaurants
- Need grocery/food store.
- Need variety store.
- Upscale townhouses downtown
- General merchandise store
- Central Square or gathering space
- Place for events and activities
- Create an Arts & Entertainment District
- Civic Center
- Housing that is appealing to professionals and families
- Hotel/Inn
- More parking
- Skating rink was a good idea to get students off of campus and into downtown.
- Funeral Home should be a Museum.
- Cultural center is needed to provide studios, gallery space, major theatre with fly space, rehearsal space, and meeting space.

## **4.0 Community Leadership and University Relations**

### **4.1 Leadership for Downtown Blacksburg**

- "It's hard to find civic leadership with resources that can make things happen."
- "Unless the Town can engage the business community to support downtown it (the plan) will go nowhere."
- The local business community is absent from important decisions, leadership in setting the direction of the community.
- Significant industries – Corning, Celanese, etc. – are missing from discussions.
- "Frustration over lack of progress... failed plans...lack of leadership... lack of decisive action." "We've planned before, but nothing ever happens."
- The Merchants Association has been a leader in funding improvements such as benches, trees, the Lyric Theater, Farmer's Market. Has annual budget of \$60-80,000 per year, half time staff, 60 members.
- A visionary discussion of downtown has not occurred in recent times.

### **4.2 Keys to Success**

- Community must pay attention to businesses already in downtown
- The Town must engage the local business community.
- Sound policies/good organization and management
- Commitment to implementation
- Maintenance and enforcement
- Partnership!

### **4.3 University/Town Relations**

- Town and Tech used to have no communication, but it has improved.
- Overall positive relationship between the Town and the University.
- Many joint efforts between the town and the University have been successful.
- New Virginia Tech President is forward thinking.
- "The earlier plan for a shared (Town/VT) parking deck across from the Conference Center failed because the Town didn't give adequate value to the land and existing parking."
- Virginia Tech purchase of University Mall seen as a further threat to expansion of retail in Blacksburg.
- University related corporation may be an approach to partner with the community on projects.
- New opportunities for Town-University to work together:
  1. Fine Arts Center

2. Parking
  3. Old schools on Draper
  4. Armory
  5. Improvement to aesthetics of downtown area
  6. Prices Fork, Turner Street area
  7. Mall entry and properties across Main Street
- "Downtown is thought of as the back of the campus."
  - The University is sensitive to the perception that it is "trying to take over downtown Blacksburg."
  - University's Research Center is very successful – "most expensive space in town" – spinning off businesses into the industrial park.

#### **4.4 University Plans**

- Relocation/expansion of arts programs and facilities at Mall entrance: Performing Arts Center, Gallery, Theaters, classrooms, rehearsal rooms, offices, etc. \$32-37 million investment planned, not including parking.
- The trend has been that existing dorms on upper quad have been converted to academic uses – there will be fewer on-campus students living in close proximity to downtown in future.
- Existing Donaldson Brown facility will be relocated with existing facility slated to become a graduate education center with classrooms and living spaces for grad students.

## **SECTION II: CRITICAL ISSUES**

This section involves distilling the information contained in the interviews and meetings into relevant points that will need to be considered during the development of the master plan. This section, in effect, will become the themes of the master plan itself. It contains the items most often mentioned as broad topics for consideration during the master plan process.

### **1.0 *Physical Plan Components***

Many interviewees felt that downtown Blacksburg was generally a pleasant environment. In fact, many expressed the idea that Blacksburg's downtown needed a "sense of completeness" or a level of consistency and finish that would, to quote one interviewee, "take it up a notch." Of course several key issues arose during the interview process that will merit special attention in the master plan. These are detailed as follows:

1. Expand the thinking of what constitutes downtown to include areas outside the core. The master plan will specifically examine up to two potential "districts" adjacent to the traditional core of downtown:
  - The North End or "New Town" district that is roughly in the area of Price's Fork Road, North Main Street and Turner Street.
  - The area immediately around Town Hall and Blacksburg Middle School roughly bounded by Eheart Street, Washington, Church, Parts of Draper, and Miller Streets. The plan will pay special attention to the potential uses that may be a part of the Middle School in the future.
2. A key issue with the plan will be developing a palette of furniture, wayfinding, signing, logos, and other items that will create a "finished" feel to downtown while preserving the authenticity of the community.
3. Many interviewees felt that downtown events were very positive contributors to the community. They also felt a sentimental attachment to Henderson Lawn and the role it plays in defining the relationship of the University and the Town. The Master Plan will focus on creating a central gathering space for the community that will likely capitalize on the inherent features of Henderson lawn and the intersection of College Avenue and Main Street.
4. Parking was the most often cited concern about downtown Blacksburg. As much as possible these concerns will be addressed in the physical master plan. However, many of the parking issues relate to management and enforcement, which should be addressed prior to any major expenditure on parking resources. We emphatically recommend a cooperative effort to address parking issues in the

downtown that will involve the Town, the University, and the local business community.

5. Circulation was perhaps the second most often issue mentioned in the interview process. This included issues with both pedestrian and vehicular circulation. Many of the problems centered on Main Street being the only thoroughfare through downtown, which created both pedestrian and vehicular problems. The master plan will address traffic calming, pedestrian crossings, and the potential to change pedestrian/vehicular relationships on streets in the downtown core.

## **2.0 Marketing Plan Components**

Marketing Downtown Blacksburg will be a critical component of the Master Plan. While there are definitely physical problems that need to be addressed, marketing and positioning the downtown to be competitive in the changing New River Valley landscape is going to be essential for downtown's success.

1. One of the most important marketing efforts will be to deliver the message that downtown Blacksburg belongs to all of the community, not simply the students at Virginia Tech. Fortunately, this marketing effort has a boost because there are several shops and features in downtown (Farmers Market and the Lyric included) that can be utilized to attract a broader market. These facets of downtown need to be promoted to the community as a whole.
2. A second marketing effort will be a tourism strategy that positions downtown Blacksburg in the region and places downtown at the forefront during the "built-in" tourism weekends during the year that include football games, graduations, move-in days, and reunion weekends. A secondary focus will be to promote Blacksburg as the "base camp" or headquarters for a vacation in Southwest Virginia.
3. A third marketing focus will be to create an identity and logo package for downtown that has multiple applications from signing to promotional packages. This product will be a "suite" of marketing materials that can be used by the community to attract visitors and enhance Blacksburg's regional appeal.

## **3.0 Responsibilities and Action**

In order for the plan to be successful it must have specific responsibilities and action and consensus as to how those responsibilities will be implemented. Several points must be considered for Blacksburg:

1. The Town, the University, and the business community should consider a more formal "developmental" capacity to handle projects where the Town and the

University intersect. This may be a development corporation that involves each of the three sectors. The master plan will suggest ways to form this entity and will provide insight into potential projects that it might consider.

2. The implementation should not deal in abstract concepts but specific timetables and horizons. The interviews expressed considerable frustration that the Town “plans” but does not “do.” It will be essential to have several projects ready to implement immediately after the plan process is completed.
3. There is a clear opinion in the community that Blacksburg is “neighborhood friendly” and consequently not “developer friendly.” The Master plan will suggest ways to bridge this gap and provide recommendations for a streamlined development process that may ease some of these tensions without sacrificing the quality of life that Town residents expect.